

## **STATEMENT BY JAMES LEE WITT**

### **On the Senate Katrina Report**

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Americans should take notice of the bi-partisan Senate Katrina Report that was released this morning, because some of its recommendations will not serve the American people well at all.

First, despite the suggestions of Sen. Trent Lott, Sen. Hillary Clinton and other lawmakers, the Senate recommends creating a new emergency management organization within the Department of Homeland Security that will be responsible for preparing for and responding to all disasters and catastrophic events. Sen. Lott has served in Congress for 33 years, where he has been a witness to the ups and downs of FEMA, so he knows what works. And what works is an independent FEMA. Sen. Clinton saw first hand under the leadership of President Clinton government working at its best.

While this recommendation helps restore power, function, and funding to its proper place, the call for creating a new organization within DHS is simply renaming FEMA, and despite Shakespeare's belief that "a rose by any other name would smell as sweet," renaming FEMA won't make it smell any better, and it will create an even greater deal of confusion than there already is. The most important step in fixing FEMA is to return it to its independent status.

The Senate's plan under this recommendation also goes a long way toward re-empowering the FEMA Director, though it stops short of the full power the director needs. The director of FEMA must hold a seat on the presidential Cabinet in order to be able to communicate directly to the President and other critical parties during a crisis and every day of normal business operations. The FEMA Director cannot report through the Homeland Security Secretary anytime, anywhere. FEMA as an agency only responded strongly and efficiently to disasters in the past when the Director reported directly to the President.

Second, the Senate's recommendation to "take a comprehensive all-hazards plus approach to emergency management" is precisely what is called for. Interoperable communications and protecting critical infrastructure are paramount, as was recognized in the report. Communications are the foundation for public safety, and a national standard is needed for interoperable communications. Following Katrina, officials had to use runners for communication. In St. Bernard Parish, there was only one functional radio, which the user could only use by standing on top of the building.

Third, the report recommends renewing and sustaining “commitments at all levels of government to the nation’s emergency management system.” By reinstating grant funding for local and state governments, planning, mitigation, and preparedness strategies will improve greatly, empowering communities to be able to handle their end of disaster management. Mitigation and preparedness helps localities keep things together until state and federal agencies get there.

The American citizens and the dedicated, hard-working employees of FEMA deserve an agency that has the structure and resources it needs to return it to the highly-functional organization it once was. The Administration and Congress must own the mistakes of the recent past, recognize what has worked in the past, and turn FEMA around from the laughingstock it has become.

Despite the doubt of some Congress members, FEMA can be fixed most effectively by simply returning it to its pre-2001 incarnation. A successful framework once existed that allowed FEMA to respond effectively to the nation’s most costly flood disaster, most costly earthquake, and a dozen hard-hitting hurricanes during the 1990s. What’s wrong with recognizing that FEMA worked before in an exemplary fashion after its 1993 reinvention, a turn-around that left FEMA with a reputation for delivering disaster-relief?

The bottom line is that Americans want and deserve a FEMA that will be there for them during the devastating catastrophes that often costs them loved ones and homes. We all want FEMA fixed; we all want FEMA to serve the American public in the best way possible; and I will help.